

THE PRESENT SITUATION REGARDING THE ENDEMIC BREEDING BIRDS OF ETHIOPIA

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We visited Ethiopia from 7 February until 17 March 1989, one objective being to attempt to identify any immediate threats affecting the endemic birds of the country. Of Ethiopia's 28 endemic breeding species, we saw all except one, but some were seen so briefly that no realistic assessment could be made of their present status. Except for a short visit to Lake Tana, only the country south of 10°N and east of 37°E was visited.

One of us (Ash) had been resident in Ethiopia in the past (1969–1977) and was familiar with the country and the status and distribution of its birds. It is against this background that qualitative judgements have been made on factors affecting them. In the past 10–12 years more ecological changes must have taken place in Ethiopia than in any period of similar duration throughout its history. There were periods of prolonged drought in several regions, widespread warfare, severe food shortages, major changes in agricultural procedures—notably in the formation of state farms and peasant associations—and major shifts in population from drought-stricken areas to Resettlement Areas elsewhere. Often undertaken under emergency conditions, little (if any) regard has been paid to the possible ecological side-effects of these activities. Compounding the many problems which must be arising is apparently a major growth in population (unless the population shift has been even greater than was thought). An immediate impression at the height of the dry season when we were there was that a population of people had moved out of one part of the country which had become partly almost uninhabitable through habitat degradation, to repeat the procedure elsewhere. The development of state farms, the system of 'villagization', the settlement of nomads, the translocation of large groups of people, are practices almost certain to cause such ecological degradation.

The effects of such changes on birdlife could be great, and most of them harmful. Forest species are most likely to be adversely affected, but those confined to restricted areas (e.g. in wetlands or bushland) can be severely disturbed by a single isolated event such as the formation of a state farm or military training area.

From Table 1, with the probable exception of Prince Ruspoli's Turaco *Tauraco ruspolii*, no other Ethiopian endemic bird is under immediate threat, and over half of them are apparently unaffected.

Table 1. *Recent changes in status of endemic birds in Ethiopia (1989 compared with 1975)*

Category	n	Approx %
a. Status apparently unchanged	15	54
b. Numbers possibly reduced	6	21
c. Numbers apparently reduced	2	7
d. Numbers certainly reduced	1	4
e. Numbers apparently increased	1	4
f. Unknown	3	11
Number of endemic species	28	

Notes:

- a. Wattled Ibis *Bostrychia carunculata*, Blue-winged Goose *Cyanochen cyanoptera*, White-collared Pigeon *Columba albitorques*, Yellow-fronted Parrot *Poicephalus flavifrons*, Banded

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- Barbet *Lybius undatus*, White-tailed Swallow *Hirundo megaensis*, White-winged Cliffchat *Myrmecocichla semirufa*, Rüppell's Chat *M. melaena*, Abyssinian Catbird *Parophasma galinieri*, White-backed Black Tit *Parus leuconotus*, White-throated Seedeater *Serinus xanthopygius*, Salvadori's Seedeater *S. xantholaema*, White-billed Starling *Onychognathus albirostris*, Black-headed Forest Oriole *Oriolus monacha*, Thick-billed Raven *Corvus crassirostris*
- b. Harwood's Francolin *Francolinus harwoodi*, Spot-breasted Plover *Vanellus melanocephalus*, Golden-backed Woodpecker *Dendropicos abyssinicus*, Degodi Lark *Mirafra degodiensis*, Black-headed Siskin *Serinus nigriceps*, Stresemann's Bush Crow *Zavattariornis stresemanni*
- c. Rouget's Rail *Rallus rougetii*, Abyssinian Longclaw *Macronyx flavicollis*
- d. Prince Ruspoli's Turaco *Tauraco ruspolii*
- e. Black-winged Lovebird *Agapornis taranta*
- f. Sidamo Long-clawed Lark *Mirafra sidamoensis*, Yellow-throated Seedeater *Serinus flavigula*, Ankober Serin *S. ankoberensis*.
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One major factor in the birds' favour in Ethiopia is that there is virtually no deliberate persecution by man. Much of this attitude, perhaps due as much to indifference as to beneficence, derives from religious beliefs, particularly on the part of the Christian half of the population. On the other hand, under the present situation in Ethiopia, there is very little chance of developing any sort of conservation programme unless it can be demonstrated clearly that it is of practical or economical value to the country. For example, little interest can be expected in conserving Prince Ruspoli's Turaco for its own sake, but a good argument can be made for conserving the forest in which it lives (and thus the bird also) on account of its value in terms of forest products, such as natural medicines, honey, firewood, building wood, water-holding properties, soil conservation, and for the genetic resources of the trees themselves.

The results of our survey are summarized under species below, in an order following Urban & Brown's 1971 *Checklist*.

COMMENTS ON SPECIES

Bostrychia carunculata Wattled Ibis

Common and widespread with no indication of any reduction in numbers nor of any obvious threats.

Cyanochen cyanoptera Blue-winged Goose

Common and widespread above 2000 m. No obvious change in distribution and status noticed, but intensified cultivation and grazing of highland wetlands and grasslands, combined with recent droughts, cannot be beneficial.

Francolinus harwoodi Harwood's Francolin

An Appendix C (i.e. "near-threatened") species in the Red Data Book. The best known site, in the Jemma (= Jemmu) Valley (Ash 1978, Collar & Stuart 1985), was revisited on 12 February. In one area where a brood of young had been seen in 1977, there was an adult female with a brood of three young about 10 days old; not far away there was a single adult and a group of three adults together. First egg dates for the brood of young must have been in the week at the end of December/early January, which confirms the earlier conclusion of first egg dates in December (Ash 1978). Local inhabitants claimed that the birds are common for a long way up and down the river and that they are very good to eat. There

had been a considerable reduction in trees, low cover and of the *Typha* beds in the valley since 1977, and this trend is certain to continue. The francolins feed often on the cultivated land, but seem to prefer or require thick (*Typha*) cover to hide in. A suitable alternative may not exist on the steeper uncultivated slopes on which the species might otherwise seek sanctuary. Local information emphasized that the francolins in the valley bottom differed from those higher up the slopes, where *F. erckelii* and *psilolaemus* occur.

A re-examination of the descriptions of the birds from Gibé gorge and from near Dembidollo (*vide* Ash 1978) indicates that they cannot have been *harwoodi* and most probably belong to a race of *clappertoni*. Although lacking the pale supercilia of many *clappertoni*, the relatively heavy 'blobbing' on their underparts, together with a reduced amount of red on the mandibles strongly suggests this species. These populations require further investigation. The known distribution of *harwoodi* is therefore confined to an area of 150 x 64 km.

***Rallus rougetii* Rouget's Rail**

Previously a common and widespread species in highland areas. We saw extremely few in 1989, in areas in which previously they had not been uncommon, from which we concluded that the greatly increased grazing pressure in marshlands and along streams may have so depleted the vegetative cover that much of the habitat has become unsuitable.

***Vanellus melanocephalus* Spot-breasted Plover**

At a highland stream site near Muketuri where the species was seen often in the 1970s in numbers up to over 40, there were 60 birds on 12 February. None was seen near Chacha on 12 March where previously it occurred at the same time of the year in flocks of up to 150.

***Columba albitorques* White-collared Pigeon**

Common and widespread, and well adapted to man-made structures. No obvious population change noticed, nor threats identified.

***Poicephalus flavifrons* Yellow-fronted Parrot**

Seen in many areas and no noticeable changes noted.

***Agapornis taranta* Black-winged Lovebird**

Widespread and seen more often than in former years. Possibly this species has benefited from the reduction in roadside sales for the pet trade.

***Tauraco ruspolii* Prince Ruspoli's Turaco**

A Rare Threatened species in the Red Data Book, this turaco is probably now under greater threat than it had been in the 1970s. On 23 February we found that the best known forested site at Genale on the Genale River north of Negele (*vide* Collar & Stuart 1985) had been entirely replaced by a 'Resettlement Area' apparently involving over 2000 people. Further west up to 74 km along the road from Negele to Kibre Mengist, there was much forest degradation and increased human settlement compared with the last visit to the area by Ash in 1973. At 38 km south-east of Wadera no turacos were found in an area where there were several in 1973; although there was no obvious reduction in tree cover, there was heavy grazing by domestic animals and destruction of lower-level vegetation. At Wadera there was one *T. ruspolii* in sparsely scattered trees near the village, and 11 km away north-west several turacos were calling in an area of quite thick, but grazed, woodland. Next day at least nine *T. ruspolii* were in this area, including a group of four feeding in and flying between a group of widely scattered trees. The species is not confined to *Juniperus* nor, necessarily, thick undisturbed woodland. Nor is it (now) the "remarka-

bly secretive and elusive" species it was considered to be by Ash in Collar & Stuart (1985), for we found quite easily several birds which were not at all shy. We do not know what the present situation is further west along this road.

At two other potential sites we did not see any *T. ruspolii*: the *Juniperus* woodland just to the west of Yavello on 21 February; and the Arero area on 23 February where much of the *Juniperus* to the east and south had apparently been destroyed by recent fire. Some sparse woodland remained to the north but was not visited. North of the Genale area the large, relatively undisturbed Hareenna Forest lies on the southern slopes of the Bale Mts. We surveyed four areas for birds at 1750, 2000, 2300–2450 and 2800 m on 5–7 March, but the only turacos seen were White-cheeked *T. leucotis*, which were common at the two lower and less so at the two higher levels (in earlier years this species had been seen lower down with *T. ruspolii* (Collar & Stuart 1985), but it was not seen there below 1750 m in 1989). Hillman (1986) in his survey in Hareenna in 1986 had four records for *T. leucotis* but did not see *T. ruspolii* either.

At the present day in Ethiopia, forest destruction and degradation can be very rapid. It is therefore essential that a survey to assess the present status and distribution of *T. ruspolii* should be arranged immediately. Until more information is available a large block of forest round Wadera should be declared inviolate and the necessary law enforcement established to safeguard both the turacos and the arboreal genetic pool.

Lybius undatus Banded Barbet

Widespread, and seen frequently, suggesting that its distribution and status have not changed greatly.

Dendropicos abyssinicus Golden-backed Woodpecker

No obvious change noted in its status or distribution, although the replacement of much native woodland with eucalyptus must affect it eventually.

Mirafraga degodiensis Degodi Lark

An Insufficiently Known Threatened species in the Red Data Book. Birds considered to be this species were observed at the type locality (Erard 1974) at 11 km east of Bogol Many on 27 and 28 February. Details are given in Ash & Gullick (in press, a).

Mirafraga (Heteromirafraga) sidamoensis Sidamo Long-clawed Lark

An Indeterminate Threatened species in the Red Data Book. This was the only endemic species we failed to find in 1989. Erard's (1974) type locality at 2 km south of Negele had been cultivated and become unsuitable habitat for this species. At Ash's site (Ash & Olson 1985) the actual collecting area was found to be in the centre of a very large army training camp. Adjoining this there still remained extensive grasslands suitable for the species, although much is a special military training area. Permission was obtained to search this, but the only larks found in the extremely dry conditions prevailing at the time were flocks of Rufous Short-toed Larks *Calandrella (rufescens) somalica*.

Hirundo megaensis White-tailed Swallow

A Rare Threatened species in the Red Data Book. No records are known since 1975 when seen by Ash in the Yavello/Mega area (Collar & Stuart 1985). We learned from Girma Zekarias, a bird-tour guide, that a number of people had sought the species unsuccessfully since. In 1989 we noted a total of 14 birds on 21 February along 35 km of the road to Mega from 15 km south of Yavello, and seven on 23 February at 29–38 km from Yavello on the road to Arero. The number of birds along the Mega road is of the same order as those recorded by Erard in 1971 (15–20 in 60 km from 20 km south of Yavello) (Collar & Stuart

1985). On the same stretch of road Ash saw 25 in January 1975. Our 1989 altitudinal range of 1600–1725 m agrees with Collar & Stuart's speculation that the species occurs at above 1500 m, well above the figures ranging between 1220 and 1520 m given by Benson (1942, 1946), Hall & Moreau (1962) and Urban & Brown (1971).

It was clear in 1989 that a number of changes had taken place in the area since 1975. In places bush had been cleared for cultivation, and at one locality a large village and settlement area had become established. There also seemed to be a large increase in the numbers of domestic animals grazing in the area, and the Southern Rangelands Development Project is established in the area lying to the east of that between Yavello and Mega. The Ethiopian Wildlife Conservation Organisation is establishing a field station at Yavello. Co-ordinated with this the Norwegian Government is funding a project through the University of Oslo on "Research on integrated wildlife management in Borana." It is urged that the opportunity should be taken to attach an ornithologist to this project to make a special study of the two local endemic birds, the White-tailed Swallow and Stresemann's Bush Crow. Two other endemics, Prince Ruspoli's Turaco and the Sidamo Long-clawed Lark, are not far away in the Negele area.

Most of the *H. megaensis* seen were close to culverts along the road, and most of these had parts of swallow nests adhering to the walls. They need to be investigated during the breeding season to identify the species involved. In the past *H. abyssinica* is the only species found breeding in such situations in that area.

***Macronyx flavicollis* Abyssinian Longclaw**

Far fewer examples of this species, previously considered to be common and widespread, were seen than were expected. Possibly their numbers have been reduced through an increase in cultivated land and a consequent increase in grazing pressure elsewhere.

***Myrmecocichla semirufa* White-winged Cliffchat**

***Myrmecocichla melaena* Rüppell's Chat**

***Parophasma galinieri* Abyssinian Catbird**

***Parus leuconotus* White-backed Black Tit**

All seen in a number of widespread localities and there was no suggestion that their numbers or distribution had been affected since 1975, for they could be found with approximately a similar degree of frequency as in the period prior to 1977.

***Serinus xanthopygius* White-throated Seed eater**

The species was seen at Bahar Dar and in the Jemmu Valley at the only two points where we entered its area of distribution. We have no reason to believe that its status or distribution have changed.

***Serinus flavigula* Yellow-throated Seed eater**

This species has not been seen for over 100 years. It was rediscovered in one of its original three collecting sites at Malca Ghebdu, where there were 7-plus, of which one was photographed by Mrs K. Gullick on 13 March (*vide* Ash & Gullick in press, b).

***Serinus xantholaema* Salvadori's Seed eater**

An Appendix C Near-threatened species in the Red Data Book. We saw a party of six on 4 March at Sof Omar, which is an area from which most previous records of this rare species have come. In this once remote gorge where only occasional local inhabitants were seen (in 1975), there were now hundreds of resettled people using its water—the only local supply at this time—for washing themselves and watering their livestock. As a result, practically all ground cover had been destroyed. It is not known to what extent

these factors may be affecting the birds, but the remarks in Collar & Stuart (1985) probably still apply: "though rare, is probably spread widely enough to be at no risk."

***Serinus nigriceps* Black-headed Siskin**

Although still common and widespread in highland areas, it appeared to be less numerous than formerly (1969–1977) on farmland. Possibly changes in farming practices have affected this species adversely.

***Serinus ankoberensis* Ankober Serin**

At least 60 birds were seen on 12 March, feeding in loose flocks close together on roughly terraced strips of sparse barley stubble among rocks and scattered scrub, just below the top of the eastern escarpment of the west highlands at 3000 m, 6.4 km north of Ankober. This seems to be only the second known sighting of this species since it was first recorded in 1976 (Ash 1979), the other being by J. Alamargot in 1981 (Collar & Stuart 1985) who found c. 50 in the same area on 19 January 1981. All records are from a narrow strip along the escarpment edge at around 3000 m at 3–8 km north of Ankober and are contained within an area of not more than 5 km². Alamargot (*loc. cit.*) also claims that observations at similar sites and altitudes in many other parts of Ethiopia have produced no record of this species. The present birds fed mostly on bare earth among scattered stones, and frequently flew up in their characteristic fashion to cling to near vertical banks and rocks. Calls heard at rest were a very sparrow-like soft *chirrup*, also rendered as a sparrow-like *witchu* and *weetchu*, and in flight a liquid *twi-ti-twi-twi*, which may have been a combination of notes from more than one bird, as well as a nasal *chirp*. Both a Brown-rumped Seedeater *S. tristriatus* and a Streaky Seedeater *S. striolatus* (their scientific names inadvertently transposed in Ash 1979) joined them as they fed.

A large increase in human activity in the area since 1977 has resulted in an increase in the area under cultivation, and much more grazing on the slopes by sheep, goats and cattle. At present this may actually benefit the birds unless it leads to erosion and destruction of the terrace banks in which the birds breed. We were surprised to be informed by a local inhabitant that a bird lived in the area which was found nowhere else in the world!

***Onychognathus albirostris* White-billed Starling**

***Oriolus monacha* Black-headed Forest Oriole**

***Corvus crassirostris* Thick-billed Raven**

No obvious changes in either distribution or status were noticed in any of these species, and they were found in pre-1977 sites in what were considered to be about similar numbers, as well as in new sites.

***Zavattariornis stresemanni* Stresemann's Bush Crow**

From 34 km north-east of Yavello, south to Mega and for up to 50 km east of Yavello on the Arero tract, 62 bush crows were noted on 20–21 and 23 February. They were most plentiful to the north and east of Yavello, although no particular search was made for them. None was seen along the track to the Sagan River to the north-west of Yavello on 22 February. At present the birds would not seem to be under any particular threat, but see the remarks under *Hirundo megaensis*.

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APPENDIX 1

Geographical co-ordinates of localities referred to in the text

Ankober	9°35'N	39°45'E	Kibre Mengist	5°53'N	39°00'E
Arero	4°45'N	38°49'E	Malca Ghebdu	9°32'N	39°56'E
Bahar Dar	11°36'N	37°25'E	Mega	4°05'N	38°19'E
Bogol Manya	4°31'N	41°32'E	Muketuri	9°33'N	38°47'E
Chacha	9°32'N	39°28'W	Negele	5°20'N	39°35'E
Dembidollo	8°32'N	34°50'E	Sagan River	5°10'N	37°37'E
Genalé	5°44'N	39°32'E	Sof Omar	6°54'N	40°47'E
Gibé gorge	8°14'N	37°35'E	Wadera	5°45'N	39°20'E
Haremma Forest	6°38'N	93°50'E	Yavello	4°54'N	38°06'E
Jemma Valley	9°58'N	38°55'E			